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THE WASHINGTON POST

Senate Aide Off On Cuba Mission

By Spencer Rich

Washington Post Staff Writer

In what could herald the first tentative gropings of a congressional drive for improved relations with Cuba, Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff director Pat M. Holt took off for Cuba yesterday for a 10-day study mission and meetings with top Cuban officials, it was learned from State Department sources.

Holt, 54, is the first high-level U.S. official to visit Cuba in more than a decade. It has taken eight years of pressure from Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. W. Fulbright (D-Ark.) to get the State Department to validate Holt's passport for travel to Cuba.

Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, informing Fulbright last December that he had decided to approve the visit, made it clear that U.S. policy is still to "discourage travel to Cuba" and that Holt "in no way represents the executive branch." But he said he was bowing to Fulbright's strong wishes.

Holt's precedent-shattering

visit (the U.S. broke off relations with the regime of Fidel Castro on Jan. 8, 1961) was initiated by the Foreign Relations Committee, not by the administration. It is described as "purely fact-finding." Akin to other visits he has made as a Latin American specialist for the committee over much of the past 24 years.

However, it clearly could have larger consequences in opening up a dialogue and in allowing the Senate committee to get much closer look at the Castro regime and the possibilities for "caribbean détente."

Holt, who took over as staff director of Foreign Relations early this year when Carl Marcy retired, was a key adviser to Fulbright during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, when the senator was a leading voice of moderation. Holt was also one of the handful of insiders advising Fulbright during the 1965 U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic, when Fulbright publicly denounced U.S. policy and broke with president Johnson, one of his oldest and closest friends.